



Published by: Oxfam India, Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, 4th and 5th Floor, 1, Copernicus Marg, New Delhi, Delhi 110001 Tel: +91-1146538000 www.oxfamindia.org

RIVERS OF HOPE

AN INTRODUCTION TO TRANSBOUNDARY RIVERS OF SOUTH ASIA (TROSA) PROJECT OF OXFAM INDIA



RIVERS OF HOPE

AN INTRODUCTION TO TRANSBOUNDARY RIVERS OF SOUTH ASIA (TROSA)
PROJECT OF OXFAM INDIA

(Supported by Government of Sweden)



Author : Shailendra Yashwant

Photography : All photograph ©Shailendra Yashwant / Oxfam India

Design : Roopa Rampura (Interactive Solutions)

Published by :

Oxfam India, Shriram Bharatiya Kala Kendra, 4th and 5th Floor, 1, Copernicus Marg, New Delhi, Delhi 110001.

Tel: +91-1146538000 www.oxfamindia.org

"This work was carried out as a part of the Transboundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA, 2017 – 2021) – a regional water governance program supporting poverty reduction initiatives in the Ganges-Brahmaputra-Meghna (GBM) and Salween basins. The program is implemented by Oxfam and its partners in Nepal, India, Bangladesh and Myanmar and supported by the Government of Sweden. Views expressed in this publication are those of the authors and don't represent that of Oxfam or, Government of Sweden."

The author would like to express his deep gratitude to :

Raju Narzary, Vinuthna Patibandla, Sandeep Langthasa, Sanya Sodhi (in Assam), Aditya Ranjan, Chandan Dubey, Ravindra Kumar, Sumant Singh Negi (in Uttar Pradesh), Animesh Prakash, Moitrayee Mondal, Pradip Kumar Bera (in Kolkata) and Tias Dutta (in New Delhi).

1. CONTENTS

1

Contents

2

Foreword

3

Introduction

4

Drifting Through Dhubri

5

Pollution in Palia Kalan

6

Lessons From Saralbhanga

7

Rivers as catalyst of change and cooperation

8

About Partners



2. FOREWORD



'Rivers of Hope' captures the struggles of the riparian communities to survive around the raging rivers in Assam and Uttar Pradesh. The photo series beautifully highlights the daily lives of those living around the Saralbhanga and Sharda river basins, their resilience to survive, their hope and commitment to solve the conflict around water governance.

The handbook also demonstrates a wide range of issues including the impact of river systems on people from Assam to Uttar Pradesh.

While the stories of the Char communities of Dhubri district of Assam reflect their struggles to survive the fury of floods every year, the communities in Lakhimpur Kheri district of Uttar Pradesh are seen battling water contamination due to industrial pollution. Their battles are different however both communities' are determined to bring positive change through collective leadership and negotiation.

Rivers of Hope gives a glimpse of the inspiring bond between the marginalized communities and the river. Communities across South Asian countries, with different ethnic identities, have recognized river systems as an integral part of their culture and not merely as a geo political issue. Floods triggered due to climate change have exposed the vulnerabilities of the communities in this region and further pushed them into poverty. Floods have not only destroyed their assets and properties but also renewed their dependence on natural resources. Poor access and control over common resources therefore has aggravated the struggles of the marginalized groups in this region.

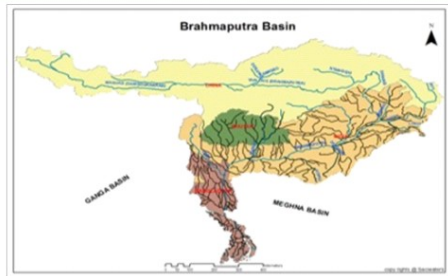
The local communities are demanding to be heard, to be stakeholders in making the policies that will affect their daily lives and their rivers. They need to be supported through knowledge on disaster risk reduction, alternative livelihood options and institutional mechanism to participate in the decision making processes.

Though the United Nations General Assembly has recognized access to water and sanitation as a human right, India still faces a huge challenge in ensuring safe water to many of the marginalized communities. In fact, inequality manifests itself brutally through the caste geography of water distribution. Oxfam India has been trying to act on this inequality of distribution and access to water based on factors like social identity and gender.

The Trans Boundary Rivers of South Asia (TROSA) project of Oxfam India tries to bring community rights at the center of all water governance discourses, acts and policies. Although the TROSA project has just begun, we hope to succeed in empowering the riparian communities to lead and take the right decisions. The project aims to ensure better community access and control over water resources, make private sector sensitive to the needs of the community and increase civil society and women participation in resolution of water conflicts so that the trans boundary water governance, policies and practices are more inclusive at all levels.

Amitabh Behar
Amitabh Behar
(CEO, Oxfam India)

3. INTRODUCTION

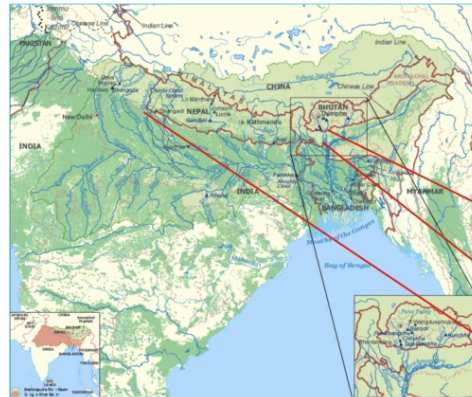


Brahmaputra River Basin:
Source- Saciwaters

This report is only a fleeting glimpse into the lives of the people of Dhubri who live on the chars of Brahmaputra river in Assam near Indo-Bangladesh border, the people of Palia Kalan who live on the banks of Sharda river (aka Kali) in Uttar Pradesh near Indo-Nepal border and the people of Kokrajhar who live on the banks of Saralbhangha river near Indo-Bhutan border.

They have survived decades of violent ethnic conflicts, series of deadly natural disasters and an increasingly hostile environment that has been recently exacerbated by climate change induced extreme weather events. They have been uprooted, removed and relocated many times because of riots and rains and raging rivers.

They have come to these rivers, seeking refuge, from far-far away, from different tribes, ethnicities, castes and communities, from forests and from mountains, from the plains, from other islands, upstream and downstream, victims of other people's war, constantly shifting in and out of the open and porous borders. They have been labeled migrants, refugees and drifters on their own land...



TROSA Project
Locations in India

Kokrajhar
Saralbhangha river

Dhubri
Brahmaputra river

Palia Kalan
Sharda river

4. DRIFTING THROUGH DHUBRI

The Brahmaputra River that originates in Tibet (China) and flows through India and Bangladesh to merge with the Bay of Bengal is one of the largest river systems in the world.

The river traverses across 800 km in Assam state of India, churning massive amounts of Himalayan silt and sand, creating and destroying transient riverine islands known as chars or saporis. According to 2002-2003 socio-economic survey of the region, there were 2251 char villages and 22 lakh people spread across 14 districts, on a landmass of 3,608 sq km or 4.6% of Assam's total area.

Brahmaputra's journey in India ends at Dhubri district in Assam, from where it enters Bangladesh to become the Padma river on its way to Bay of Bengal. Dhubri district is the biggest confluence of chars that cover an area of 1664.10 sq. km. Most of Dhubri's population is spread on the chars where they cultivate land, raise cattle or practice fishing. Over 90 per cent of the cultivated land on these chars is flood-prone and over 40 percent of the land is severely affected by erosion.

Since the ancient times these chars have offered shelter to the poor and the homeless, the migrants and the refugees, the outcastes and the exiled. The newcomers seduced by the rich soil began cultivating these fertile islands, always aware that the chars are but temporary homes that will disappear into the river one day or reform somewhere else downstream the next.

With Bangladesh a stone's throw away and a long history of migration through the porous riverine border, many of the islets' residents, have been historically, isolated socially as Bangladeshi refugees or illegal immigrants by the locals, thereby increasing their vulnerability and sending them further down in the administration's priorities and responsibilities.



Brahmaputra River, Assam, India



Mallikabibi, resident of Manderchar Monichar, an islet on the Brahmaputra river in Dhubri district of Assam, about 10 kms from Bangladesh border, is busy salvaging what is left of her house that was recently washed away into the river due to erosion. This is the fifth time she and her husband, Mahalam Sheikh, were moving their house since they arrived here almost 15 years ago from their home island of Mandurgaon, that like so many other chars was consumed by the mighty Brahmaputra. Unfortunately, this time they can only move a few meters inland as there is no land available on the char anymore and even if it was available the elderly couple do not have the cash or access to credit to buy land for new house. A few years ago, their three sons, like all young and able-bodied men from here, left the char for the cities to look for work. Besides an occasional money order, the aged couple are otherwise practically abandoned by their children.



"We have learnt to live with the wrath of Brahmaputra, the recurring floods and constant erosion that submerge entire chars during monsoon. We know that we can never settle down in one anymore. Once upon a time we used to cultivate jute and rice on our ancestral land of Mandurgaon, on Niz Monirchar but it was gobbled up by the Brahmaputra, now most of our youngsters have gone to cities for work while we survive by fishing in the river," says Safaruddin Ahmad pointing out the collapsing banks of Monichar that washed away recently built toilets of a school building.

Everything comes and goes by boat on the river between the chars. Manderchar Monichar has no hospital or Primary Health Centre. Any kind of medical emergency needs to be treated at Dhubri or Phulbari hospital. Both of them, 2 hours away and only accessible by boats. The char has two lower primary schools. For higher education the children have to travel to Dhubri or Phulbari. The sole mode of transport to anywhere from here is by boat. And the women are not comfortable, in fact are afraid of sending their daughters alone anywhere by boat for higher education.



Sobujabi with her child and mother-in-law outside a tiny shed made from tin sheets that she was able to salvage from the roof of her house that was consumed by the river a few months ago. Sobujabi, lives with her four children and mother in law in the hastily constructed tin-shed. Her husband is a carpenter and works somewhere in Meghalaya, she is not sure where exactly, but he does come back regularly to visit. While men migrate to cities, it's the women who are left alone at home with the responsibility of raising children, providing care to the elders and most importantly keeping their houses together in times of floods and storms. Sobujabi's husband was not able to come back in time when her house began slipping into the river, but her neighbours, Bengali muslims and Hindus from the Das community helped her salvage what they could and rebuild this temporary shelter.





"The problem of women in the chars of Dhubri cannot be seen in isolation. While all char dwellers face problems like lack of basic amenities, difficult livelihood, women's condition is worsened because of their gender. Shifting home frequently and forced to migrate often psychologically takes a toll on women. Losing home means losing a sense of belonging for women. Without a home, the identity of the homemaker becomes ambiguous. The responsibility of setting up a new home is also mainly on women. All these deprivation on multiple levels compounds the problem that women in the char areas face".³

³ Homemakers without a home: women and displacement in Chars of Dhubri April 5, 2015
By Parvin Sultana,
<http://twocircles.net/2015apr05/1428246920.html>



Ayesha Bibi of Chaitarchar in Seboltari village, earns Rs. 400 for each Dakmanda, [traditional wrap around skirt of Garo women of Meghalaya] she weaves. She has to work for 32 hours over 4 days to weave 1 Dakmanda that sells for upto Rs. 4000 in the markets of Shillong and Kokrajhar. Devoid of the opportunity of higher education, women when not trying to save and salvage their home and household from the storms, floods and the slipping ground beneath them, the scramble for any work they can find to supplement the meager income the men send back home.

Under the TROSA program, Oxfam India and its local partners NERWSN have begun to organise group of individuals, invest on grooming local leaderships, Enhance their participation in local development plans (like GPDPS), provide improved access to information on development schemes and programmes and provide facilitative support to the communities to access benefits from these schemes and programmes. Better participation in planning process and improved capacity to negotiate with critical stakeholders will lead to better penetration of Government schemes in these areas.

TROSA's overarching plan is to organise the CSOs, key Govt line Departments, academia and Private sector to promote collective action for inclusive water governance in Brahmaputra river basin. We plan to take a network based approach and are reaching out to local alliances and networks in Upper Assam, Central Assam Lower Assam so that they can collectively advocate on the issues of Water Governance across Brahmaputra.





Sharda river, Uttar Pradesh, India

5. POLLUTION IN PALIA KALAN

The Sharda river, also referred to as Kali River, is a Himalayan River with its origin at an altitude of 3,600 metres (m) in the Milam glacier in the Phithoragarh district of Uttarakhand. The upper course of the Sharda/Kali River forms India's continuous eastern boundary with Nepal. The village of Palia Kalan falls in the path of Sharda River as she flows from Phithoragarh district of Uttarakhand to Ghagra River in Bahraich, Uttar Pradesh.

Floods, Sharda River and Palia Kalan are synonymous. The area has been witnessing floods since long, but it has increased in proportion and impact after 2008. And yet despite the hardships the floods bring, the people of Palia Kalan have over the years slowly learnt to adapt to the river's vagaries. In Palia Kalan the people are victims of their own occupation.

The people of Palia Kalan are mainly agriculturists. Sugarcane is the main crop here and they engage in the business as cultivators, contractors, agricultural labourers and marginal workers.

The women community remain in the village and engage as agricultural labourers, and daily wage earners in the sugar cane farms. The workers on large farms come from the local villages, from Nepal (Tharu tribes settled along the border) or from Bangladesh, settled on the periphery of the forests along the banks of the Sharda River. Ploughing, leveling, planking and the application of fertilizers, pesticides and weedicides, irrigation and the transportation of sugarcane from the fields to the sugarcane centers is done by family members of the farmer, while contractors do sugarcane sowing and harvesting.

But sugarcane farming, fed by the endless supply of water from Sharda river, has now begun to poison every water stream and the Sharda river as untreated effluents from two of the largest sugar mills in Palia Kalan is playing havoc with the lives of the local community driving them further into poverty.



Ravina crossing over a polluted pond to reach home, less than 10 kms from Sharda river. All the nallas, rivulets, ponds and waterbodies Palia Kalan, have been polluted by untreated effluents from two large sugar mills, in fact one of them the second largest in Asia, agricultural runoff from endless swathes of sugarcane farms and untreated sewage from human settlements. The water in these parts is naturally contaminated by arsenic.



All the local villagers point fingers to two sugar mills for the ongoing pollution. The Kisan Sahakari Chini Mills in Sampurna Nagar and Bajaj Hindusthan sugar mills as the main polluters in Palia Kalan area of Lakhimpur. They allege that there have been a number of accidents at the plant and random release of untreated effluents by both the factories into the nallas and rivulets that empty into Sharda river.

Bajaj Hindustan Sugar mill set up in 1972 is situated on the banks of Sharda river as it enters India from Nepal at Palia Kalan in Uttar Pradesh, India. The ethanol based sugar refining mill buys sugarcane grown by Sikh farmers that settled here after 1947. The plant's installed capacity is 5,000 tonnes crushing daily (TCD) of sugarcane with annual production of Sugar, 18 million litres of ethanol. It features on the Uttar Pradesh Pollution Control Board (UPPCB) as one of the grossly polluting industries discharging effluents into water course having a BOD load of 100kg/day or more. The Nala that the factory releases its effluents in meets Sharda river 15 kms away.
http://upenvs.nic.in/Database/Grossely_polluting_industries_1022.aspx.



A large volume of waste of organic nature is produced during sugar production, and normally the effluents are discharged onto land or into nearby watercourses, usually small streams that meet the Sharda river, with little or no pre-treatment. Since the sugar industry operates on a seasonal basis, wastewater production is also obviously seasonal. A large variation is observed in the quality and quantity of wastewater generated in various sugar mills. The wastewater has a high COD, BOD, Suspended Solids and also most acidic pH levels.



Putrefaction of the polluted stream water caused by the heavy discharge of organic waste, resulting in odour nuisance near Sugar mills is a very common phenomenon. Conditions become worse as the stream flow reaches a very low level and when enough dilution water is not available during the period of operation of the Sugar mills (early November to end of May or June).

"The river is polluted. The wells are polluted. Rainwater ponds are polluted and even the hand pump delivers a cocktail of chemicals due to severe arsenic poisoning of groundwater. Our children suffer from regular bouts of dysentery, our women are riddled with skin diseases and pollution related diseases."
- Shanti Devi, Palia Kalan, Uttar Pradesh.





Oxfam India is constantly assessing the impact of sugar mills on its surrounding environment through our regular interactions with the local communities. Oxfam India believes that all companies involved in the sugar supply chain must practice highest levels of social and environmental safeguards. Oxfam India has initiated a multi-stakeholder dialogue in the sugarcane supply chain of UP to address various social and environmental issues. Constant dialogue and joint intervention by all stakeholders involved in the supply chain is the way forward.



6. LESSONS FROM SARALBHANGA

There are 56 rivers that flow down from the Himalayan kingdom of Bhutan to the eastern state of Assam in India to meet the Brahmaputra River. The hills of Bhutan are covered with lush forests, but on the Indian side of the border there are vast tracts of dry plains with occasional patches of severely denuded forests. Not very long ago the forests were contiguous across the borders but internal migration, poverty and increasing demand for fuelwood changed the landscape drastically on the Indian side of the border.

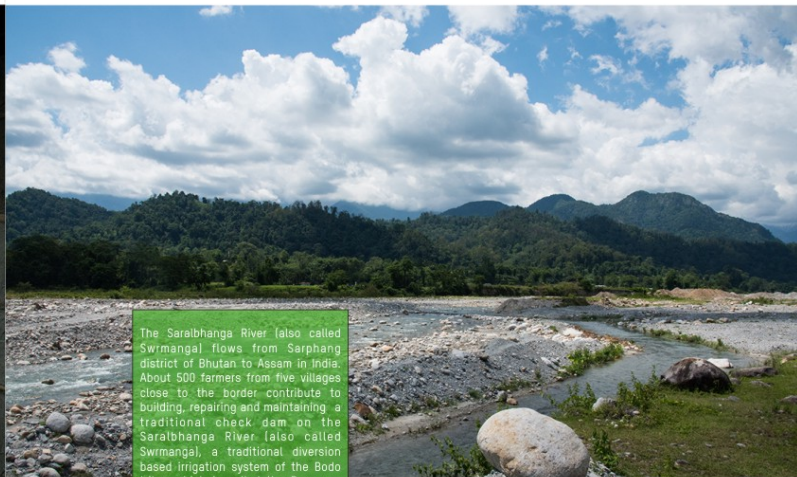
Due to climate change all the rivers flowing from Bhutan to India have changed their behaviour dramatically in the last decade – with long periods of dryness, shallow flow and then repeated flash floods, followed by massive amount of silt, sand, sediments, stones and boulders hurtling downstream across the border into India, constantly altering the river's course. This has caused hardships and misery to people on both sides of border.

Downstream communities in Assam have regularly raised the alarm, attributing these changes to dam building upstream in Bhutan. They are worried that the plans to build more dams in Bhutan will lead to more flooding, erosion and more destruction than good. The Bhutanese government and their Indian dam consultants have dismissed these objections in the past, but the recent erratic weather patterns have upset all predictions and is now shaping the future flow of the river and Bhutan's relationship with India.

For the women of the Sarpang villages Jamfwi or Dongo irrigation system is central to the survival of the villages. At the community level, women participate in all decision-making around the amount of water to be lifted for each household and the contribution to the maintenance of the irrigation system. It is the women who have the most at stake and are the ones who want a more permanent solution, a treaty between the two countries if possible, so that there a better conversation about water flow on both sides of the border.



Kamala Mushahary, outside her hut in Sarphang. The Bodo people along India-Bhutan border are recovering from intermittent periods of ethnic conflict and armed clashes in Assam that has displaced over 400,000 people since 1996. Mass exodus and internal migration have affected employment, land rights and traditional occupations. As a result returning families depend heavily on natural resources for their livelihoods. Some 70% of the region's population is food and energy deficient.



The Saralbhangha River (also called Swrmangal) flows from Sarphang district of Bhutan to Assam in India. About 500 farmers from five villages close to the border contribute to building, repairing and maintaining a traditional check dam on the Saralbhangha River (also called Swrmangal), a traditional diversion based irrigation system of the Bodo tribe, which is called the Dongo or Jamfwi system

Following the devastating floods of 2016 and 2017, the Bhutan government put an embargo on building of check dams traditionally built and maintained by Indian farmers to divert the water through the Jamfwi aka dongs (irrigation channels) to their villages. Without water from the Jamfwi check dams, the farmers downstream cannot irrigate their crops. This caused much concern and consternation among downstream communities.

, started diverting the flow of the river and contracted out stone mining in the river bed as part of their much required flood mitigation actions. But this proved to be devastating for the downstream farmers. Any changes in the river, its flow, its course and its siltation adversely affects farmers. The check dam on the Saralbhangra are critical to feed the Jamfwi irrigation system, without which most farmers cannot cultivate their land.



The Jamfwi or Dongo irrigation system channels water across the border into India through a labyrinth of small canals to irrigate rice and vegetable farms. Most farmers grow paddy, black dal and ginger using the traditional irrigation system. Communities on both sides of the India-Bhutan border consume the produce.

Anarsingh and Raju Kumar Narzary, executive director of the Northeast Research and Social Work Networking (NERSWN), a Kokrajhar-based NGO and members of All Bodo Students Union, Bodo Women's Forum for Peace and Development, met the officials of the Bhutan India Friendship Association (BIFA) to raise the concerns of the farmers. The BIFA officials facilitated an urgent meeting with the deputy commissioner of Sarphang district of Bhutan and after understanding the plight of the farmers, the Bhutanese officials agreed to allow the farmers to continue to build check dams and also decided to help the farmers divert the water of Saralbhangha River for irrigation purposes, which they have been doing for centuries. This has given huge relief to at least 5,000 farmers.



7. RIVERS AS CATALYSTS FOR CHANGE AND COOPERATION



"One Step up and two steps back, sadly that's been the only way forward for us for last so many years," is an oft repeated statement amongst the flood affected communities of Assam. The mighty Brahmaputra's insatiate hunger has engulfed land and assets of riverine communities not once or twice but ten times in last 15 years.

There is no threshold, no breaking point. Assembling whatever little is left to start lives afresh and repeat the same in the next floods and the next like the never ending loop.

It is only the poorest of the poor who stay back by the river to face increasing uncertainties that come with it. These must be the most resilient communities on both sides of the border, and with a little help, their lives can certainly be improved by helping them reduce risk from disasters, provision of alternative livelihood on the chars so that they don't have to migrate and involve them in the decision making process, concerning their most important resource, the river.

Water issues in river basins are becoming more and more complex and far reaching at all levels - local, regional, and national. Therefore, it is equally necessary for the complexities to have a voice, otherwise water has the potential to trigger conflict and chaos. Voices will have to be heard, deciphered, and shared amongst those who are connected with the flow. By building community based leadership and organizing village institutions and involving women, the first in line of all disasters, in the decision making process, we feel that we can bring about real change here.

Rivers can be a catalyst in not only bridging gaps between different marginalised communities but also prosper collectively through shared and innovative use of common resources.

TROSA targets only to create enabling environment and build transformative capacities so that these communities can negotiate for better options, and take only forward steps with a hope to come out of the unending loop of disaster and poverty. In this endeavour, the project will engage with Governments at various levels to ensure that policies and practices in water resource management are more inclusive of community concerns.

We have to ensure that practices of private sector respect community access to water resources and local CSOs increasingly participate to influence trans-boundary water governance for inclusion of the most marginalised riparian communities.

In the last mile, community have more secure access and control over their water resources and are better to reduce their vulnerability to water resource related shocks including conflicts and disasters. The water should no more be the bane of their lives, but should pave the way for cohesiveness and prosperity.

TROSA also plans to strengthen the community to community and the multi-stakeholders ties across boundaries, as we believe that in the regional context many issues can be better dealt with. Some such areas identified by us includes Early Warning, Transboundary Navigation and trade, and responsible financing to private sector thus promoting corporate water stewardship. The influencing work will focus largely on promoting inclusive policies on water governance and other related policies and acts which has a direct impact on lives of the riparian communities.

By Animesh Prakash – Project Lead, Oxfam India.

8. OUR PARTNERS



Grameen Development Services

Grameen Development Services (GDS) was founded in 1993 and registered under the Societies Registration Act, 1860. GDS works with its head office at Lucknow (U.P.) and strives for the economic and social empowerment of the socio-economically disadvantaged sections of the society. GDS works in regions characterized by structural poverty and extreme social and economic backwardness. Apart from its head office, the field offices are located at 9 locations in north India region. GDS presently operates in three poor states of India; Uttar Pradesh (UP), Bihar and Rajasthan.



North Eastern Research and Social Networking (NERSWN)

The North East Research & Social Work Networking (NERSWN) is registered as society based in Kokrajhar district of Bodoland (Assam), India. Through transparency & participatory means, NERSWN strives to realize development & rights of the marginalized through building capacities of communities & strengthening knowledge technology & networks.

Currently, the NERSWN is involved with six thematic areas viz. Health, Education, Livelihood, Women Empowerment, Advocating for the Rights of the Marginalized and Research & Networking. The organization also plays supportive role for other civil society organization through training, workshop, lending support to other small organization and being part of the various peaceful & democratic campaign of those organization.



People's Action for Development (PAD)

Peoples Action for Development (PAD) was formed on 25th December, 2001 at Mission Baligaon in Gogamukh, Assam, with the aim of socio-economic development of socially backward classes, mainly Adivasis and tribal.

PAD seeks to achieve equal and just society through empowerment of the Marginalized Adivasis and tribal people by organizing them into SHGs, building their capacity and enabling them to utilize available resource and creating awareness about environment.



Aaranyak

Aaranyak is a registered society working in the field of nature conservation in North East India since 1989. Its strength lies in applied research in biological and social field and its thrust area of work is the North Eastern India and Eastern Himalayas. It is being recognized as a Scientific and Industrial Research Organisation (SIRO) by the DSIR of Ministry of Science and Technology, Govt. of India. Our mission is to foster conservation of biodiversity in Northeast India through research, environmental education, capacity building and advocacy for legal and policy reform to usher a new era of ecological security.



Oxfam India

Oxfam is celebrating its 67th year of humanitarian service in India. In 1951, Oxfam Great Britain launched its first full scale humanitarian response to the Bihar famine. In the past six decades Oxfam has supported civil society organisations across the country. In 2008, various Oxfams in India joined forces to form Oxfam India. Registered as an independent organisation, Oxfam India has indigenous staff and board members. We are a member of the global confederation of 20 Oxfams.